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*“Community is itself a symbolic construct upon which people draw, rhetorically and strategically. Claims to act in the best interests of the ‘community’ or to represent the ‘community’ are powerful. We’re all supposed to be in favour of ‘community’”*

(Jenkins, 2007: 136, emphasis added).

### Introduction

In contemporary society the influence of the mass media has gradually been increasing and, nowadays, the media is just one identity-building resource among other socialisation agents such as school and parents, as well as social structures like gender, class or ethnicity. We want to focus on the important role that the mass media plays in the building of the “public sphere”, which is understood as an imaginary community which does not necessarily require national boundaries. Jürgen Habermas wrote in 1962 about the relationship between “public sphere” and “public opinion”<sup>1</sup>, highlighting the important role of political parties and the press in the creation of both notions. But, in this text, what we are really interested in is the “public connection” concept, that is, the relationship between the media and political engagement (Couldry *et al.*, 2007). There are multiple ways in which media consumption contributes to public connection and shows expanding political interest and there is no doubt that it is an essential question in the context of Europe. “Europeanization means contact, direct or virtual, and without such contact it is difficult to see how people from different European countries would intermarry, merge capital in practices of co-ownership, or come to see themselves as Europeans” (Díez Medrano, 2008: 9). And, in this contact, the mass media is a key agent in order to ‘flag’ Europeanism as a supra-nationhood.

On the one hand, the creation of a European sense of belonging can be fostered by all kinds of messages in the media. Thus, not only information and news, but also fiction, is able to shape media content. “Even the daily weather forecast can do this” (Billig, 1995: 154). Morley and Robins (1995) have said that news travels more easily across borders than entertainment

1. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* was translated from German to English in 1989 by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence.

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programmes because entertainment loses more from one country to another and necessitates more adaptation than news to remain relevant to local audiences. Probably, journalism has a more standardised style than entertainment and, therefore, is easier to understand. But, anyway, these journeys are not easy. While we were writing this paper, we were able to analyse the press reaction in Europe to the *Charlie Hebdo* attack and we could see the difficulty in establishing dialogue between (and within) cultural settings<sup>2</sup>. Some readers may think that by virtue of its extremity, such a situation is not useful as an example here. While we agree about the extreme nature of the event, we consider it useful because, somehow, it reflects the fragility of journalism (information and opinion) and, even more importantly, it is also a reflection of the predominance of the current geopolitical and cultural polarisation in the global world. Inside Europe we also find different polarisations: 'North' and 'South'; 'our country' and 'the others'; or 'one region' and 'the others' (for example, Scandinavia or Eastern Europe and the others).

On the other hand, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) development has increased global and transnational flows of information<sup>3</sup>. New transnational media have grown in Europe since the last decades of the 20th century (Chalaby, 2002; Moragas *et al.*, 1999). Here we are especially interested in those that try to create a Europeanist identity that people can identify themselves with (Carelli, 2014). These networks emerged out of the pre-existing national – and public – broadcasting structures and can operate jointly with other public service broadcasters. This is the case of Francophone TV5 Monde (launched in 1984), 3Sat (created in 1984 with the involvement of three public channels from Germany, Switzerland and Austria) and Arte, the Franco-German cultural TV network which has run from 1991. But, they can also operate jointly with commercial operators. In this group, Euronews (a multilingual news channel, developed through collaboration between Italy, France and Spain and running since 1993) and Eurosport (co-run by the French TF1 Group and Discovery Communications since 1989) are particularly prominent. These are television stations that in their “technology, ownership, distribution of programmes and audiences work across the boundaries of nation-states and language communities” (Barker, 1997: 45).

Taking this information into account, the question we will try to answer here is: can the media really contribute to public connection within Europe? Achieving this objective is not an easy task. Although media consumption contributes to public connection, it does not ensure it. The creation of a sense of European Union belonging is very difficult if we consider that the EU is “a unique international organization whose member states have different historical, cultural, political, and economic trajectories in relation to Europe and the EU” (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2014: 49). Europeanism refers to a supranational identity where belonging and identification are linked to being part of Europe as a continent, as a civilization and as an organisation.

### **Do the mass media have a role in encouraging participation in Europe?**

According to McQuail (2010), supranational media organisations should reflect, in their own structure and content, the various social, economic

2. On the morning of 7 January 2015, two armed men forced their way into the offices of the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. The attack reinforced the discussion about the relationship between Islam and Europe and, at the same time, was justified because *Charlie Hebdo* had published cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad.
3. Communications satellites were the beginning and now we have the World Wide Web (WWW).

and cultural realities of the societies in which they operate. One question we have to highlight is *the difficulty for media players in overcoming cultural diversity and operating in a multinational environment (diversity of languages and of nation states)*. First, in Europe most of the media were created in order to respond to one nation (state) within a public communication system. Until the early 1980s, television broadcasting in Europe had a strong territorial and national bias. Second, although we can mention examples of transnational European media whose main aim is to expand the idea of Europe, they tend to focus on several nations rather than on the union of nations as a whole. Third, we can talk about pan-European channels that are a milestone in the process of media globalisation in Europe but whose strategy is based on localisation, which consists of adapting programmes to local audiences. Localisation is “a globalizing practice that helps cross-border channels to remain competitive in a multinational environment” (Chalaby, 2002: 184). In fact, pan-European channels began with a pan-European content strategy and had to desist from it. Chalaby (ibid.) explains four levels of localisation: introduction of local advertising windows, means of translation (dub or subtitle their programmes according to their audience), the introduction of local programming and, last, and most complex, the launch of a separate local channel with fully regionalised operations and productions facilities<sup>4</sup>.

Another question relates to regulatory areas. The growth of pan-European television was facilitated by regulatory changes. The process of deregulation and liberation initiated throughout the 1980s and 1990s tried to create a 'supranational media space' in Europe<sup>5</sup>. And, in a few words, we can say that *the laws that regulate the media sector in each country were subject to reviews and reforms in line with the changes in the supranational legislation, but significant divergence in action and regulation of media at national levels remain* (Levy, 1999). But the problem was (and is) even more complex. According to Pauwels and Burgelman (2003), in order to make a European knowledge society, three aspects of EU regulation had to be fine-tuned. The first was overcoming the fact that European information society policy was to a large extent concerned with infrastructure (telecommunications policy). The second obstacle (completion policy) was the conflict between the will of the EU to install fair competition – open the market, abolish the existing monopolies, etc. – and the need for at least a stable environment with guaranteed revenues to attract the necessary investment in trans-European networks. The last concerns media policy, which is, in our view, the most important issue, because it is related to the fact of safeguarding diversity and pluralism. It is this tension between the local (nation states have been there far longer than the EU) and the global realities that makes a pan-European communication policy so problematic, much more so than the technical problems.

Therefore, it is not too surprising that the most common setting for the mass media is to show the world through a narrow lens of national interest. But, although the mass media tend to talk about nations more than about Europe, it is also important to know how they speak about Europe. After reading some authors who have analysed the means through which European identity is being defined<sup>6</sup>, we arrived at this conclusion: there is a predominance of a banal Europeanism in the media. In global terms, the use of symbols (like flags or anthems) and the lack of deixis<sup>7</sup> ('we', 'our', 'the European Union' and so on) in media discourse are considered indicators of banal nationalism by the analysts.

4. MTV (Music Television), with MTV España, is a good example of a separate local channel. MTV is an American-based media organisation, an example of an aggressive strategist that wants to expand outside the US (home market) and sees Europe as a good opportunity to increase its revenue. Music Television (MTV) was launched in 1981 and began a European service in 1987. MTV España was created in 2000.
5. Two important documents related to broadcasting regulation were the *Green Book on Television without Frontiers* (1984) and the *Green Book on Telecommunications* (1987). We have to stress the role of the EBU (European Broadcasting Union), an alliance of public service media entities, established on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1950.

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If the media keeps talking about Europe and the banality remains, the problem will stay. If we assume a link between banal representation and banal identity through the audience's identification process, the problem will increase year by year.

Here, we want to highlight the study of Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova (2014). She looked for trends of banal Europeanism in two pretty different national contexts: Bulgaria, an eastern European country, and the United Kingdom, with its anti-European position. Her study consists of two key components. First, a content analysis of seven TV programmes – four British and three Bulgarian – and an audience study comprising 174 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with children in schools in both countries. Secondly, data from the Eurobarometer was used. The field work was made from 2009 to 2010. Her main conclusions give a useful outlook, taking into account the featured differences between Bulgaria and the United Kingdom.

From a quantitative perspective, media coverage shows that the European topic is considerably more salient on the Bulgarian media agenda than on the British one. There are more stories about Europe/EU on Bulgarian TV (18.8%: 67 stories out of a total of 355) than on British TV (6.9%: 14 stories out of 202). The use of the EU flag is greater on Bulgarian TV (12.7% of total) than on its UK equivalent (0.5%). The qualitative references to Europe in Bulgarian TV stories imply an inferior position for Bulgaria and often an out-group description of Europe. For example, the analysis shows that it is usual to find news about decisions that apply in Bulgaria being justified by EU guidelines<sup>6</sup>. By contrast, the rare references to Europe on British TV channels described the UK as a fully-fledged part of EU and/or an equal partner. In relation to the media diet from audience's perspective, television is the main source of information on Europe and on the European Union, but, in England schools and parents also play an important role<sup>7</sup>. And, in reference to European identity, it was not particularly salient for children in either country but slightly more among English children. To finish, the Eurobarometer shows that the adult population does not endorse European identity in either of the countries. 43% in Bulgaria and 28% in the UK defined themselves as European.

These findings are very interesting. There is no doubt that 'flagging' or presenting Europeanism as a supra-nationhood is not an easy task for mass media. More news does not result in more people internalising a European identity. It is also necessary to monitor the quality and to know not only what the media focus on but also what is missing. The content has to be created far away from banal representations of Europe and Europeans and the mass media cannot work alone. A "public sphere" moving forward in the same direction is necessary, taking into account that 'community' is ideological: "it not only says how things are, it says how they *should* be" (Jenkins, 2007: 136). In this sense, European political intervention is necessary and the difficulty lies in indicating the degree and nature of it.

### What about audience?

In order to harmonise pan-European data and an upmarket universe, the European Media and Marketing Survey (EMS)<sup>10</sup> was created in 1995. The national surveys, like peoplemeter panels – the television industry

6. We recommend reading Cram (2001) and Billig (1995).
7. These words normally refer to national identity (with or without State), but they can also be used to talk about Europe.
8. Examples of bad practices: saying that the EU wants Bulgaria to reduce the number of hospitals or talking about the EU only as a source of funds.
9. The audience study focused on England, the biggest and most Eurosceptical of the four UK nations.

standard – did not give the information pan-European media needed, as their sample sizes and election criteria were inadequate for measuring European audiences. We have to emphasise that the EMS only evaluates the media diet of Europe’s wealthiest 20% of households, but it is the only source we have for European audiences.

EMS results say that the pan-European media audience is extremely small and its market share rarely surpasses the 4% mark. According to EMS 2014, for instance, Euronews – the channel with the highest audience – reaches 3.6% of affluent people every day in continental Europe (excluding the United Kingdom and Ireland), placing the channel first among its TV news channel competitors. Every day, around 1,600 people access Euronews. CNN and Sky News are in second place, both with around 1,500 viewers. The next in the ranking is BBC World News, with 1,075 viewers. It is, therefore, unquestionable that the size and reach of these media outlets has to be increased.

The second idea we have to think of surrounds the notion of a “homogeneous European audience”. It is evident that it does not exist. In a national context, it is problematic to assume that all people will unequivocally embrace national identity, and consequently, such an assumption in relation to Europe as a whole becomes more problematic. As a curiosity we would like to quote a study that was edited in 2002 by Marieke de Mooij and Geer Hofstede. These authors distinguish between individualist and collectivist cultures:

“Members of individualist cultures are more textual and verbally oriented than members of collectivist cultures. Individualists read more books than collectivists, who are more visually oriented. This difference may help to explain why there are twice as many radios as television sets in Sweden and Germany, whereas in Portugal and Spain the number of television sets exceeds that of radios” (Mooij and Hofstede, 2002: 67).

It is true that when we read this quote in 2015, it sounds like a curiosity rather than an academic study, but at the same time it shows how academic studies can also contribute to creating stereotypes based on nationality. This problem is related to methodological nationalism, “the equation between the concept of society and the nation state in modernity” on which we agree with Chernilo (2006: 5): “In agreement with the thesis that methodological nationalism must be rejected and transcended, (we argue) that we still lack an understanding of what methodological nationalism actually is and, because of that, we remain unable to answer the substantive problem methodological nationalism poses to social theory: how to understand the history, main features and legacy of the nation state in modernity”.

In addition to methodological difficulties, we have a deep theoretical problem. In order to have a “homogeneous audience”, there has to be a “European identity” that brings it together. Hence, the question is: does a European identity exist? Here we understand identity within a sociological frame, which implies a series of identifications and on-going processes<sup>11</sup>. Although it is possible to take a social psychological understanding, we would rather talk about a social process and not about an individual process, in line with Jenkins (2007). “Group identification, by

10. The EMS survey has been rebranded to Ipsos Affluent Survey/EMEA on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015. For more information, see <http://ems.ipsos-nederland.nl/who/about/default.aspx>

One of the main debates has to be centred on the place of the citizen in the media, both in terms of how they are addressed as a public (participant or not) and as citizens (strategies of engaging the public in issues around the democratic state).

definition, presupposes that members will see themselves as minimally similar” (ibid.: 132). And according to the same author, this similarity does not mean an absence of differences, in fact, there is a constant interplay of similarity and difference.

“Differences of opinion and more – of world-view, cosmology and other fundamentals – among and between members of the same community are normal, even inevitable. They are masked by a semblance of agreement and convergence generated by shared communal symbols, and participation in a common symbolic discourse of community membership that constructs and emphasizes the boundary between members and non-members” (ibid.: 137).

Some authors say that a European identity does exist (Bruter, 2005) while others are sceptical. Within the last group, most assume that the construction of a European identity is one of the biggest problems facing Europe and we agree with them. To finish with this problem – which leads nowhere – we suggest thinking about the emergence of European social groups. Díez Medrano (2008: 4) explains that since 1986 what we call the European Union “has moved from being a customs union to becoming a single market with a common currency and institutions that cover a whole range of economic, social, and political policy areas. The new European Union has a tremendous impact on the European citizens’ lives, whether they know it or not”. Díez Medrano (ibid.: 5) argues that, instead of paying attention to what people think about the European process, it is necessary to focus on “the emergence of European social groups, that is, transnational groups of European citizens whose consciousness and behavior denote solidarities that transcend national and subnational affiliations”. In this sense, Díez Medrano (ibid.) talks about, for instance, the development of a growing trans-European network of voluntary civil associations. Therefore, one option is to talk more about “social action”, and not only about “social identification”. It is a way to show that a European society can exist, although it seems possible only through the formation of minority groups which are, at the same time, dynamic and flexible.

More than 50 years ago, Rokkan and Campbell (1960) argued that two indexes had to be taken into account in establishing political participation: namely, involvement in organised political activity and attention to politics in the media. Nowadays, we can say that the media not only has to pay attention to politicians but also to social participation. From this point of view, one of the main debates has to be centred on the place of the citizen in the media, both in terms of how they are addressed as a public (participant or not) and as citizens (strategies of engaging the public in issues around the democratic state).

11. Sociology talks about self-identification and society’s role (social identity). Psychology talks about perception (personal identity).

12. How to quantify the *relationship* between *television* and social media (mainly Twitter) from the audience perspective (number of users, comments about TV programmes, etc.) is one of the most important questions that companies like Nielsen, a leading global information and measurement company, have to resolve.

## What can the media do in the future?

The role of ICT seems essential. ICT has influenced communication between individuals, organisations and communities. Fears of declining regular news followers, and, therefore, political engagement are exacerbated by concern for the fragmentation of audiences. The increase in the number of channels has reduced the average audience per channel and, in the face of this, the ICT could play an important role. Social media can be used to collectively resolve ‘public issues’<sup>12</sup>.

Audience participation is not a new phenomenon, but it is a far more prominent feature online than in traditional media. With digital interactive media, opportunities to more directly influence and participate in the production of media content have increased. Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs (2007) propose two levels of interaction: interactivity and intercreativity. The first one is associated with the notion of *prosumer* (producer + consumer)<sup>13</sup>, an audience which can interact and media that lets them perform some actions, for example, leaving comments. The second one is associated with the notion of *produser* (producer + user) an audience that can produce content.

“The Ford mass production model has been replaced by one of individuation, personalization, and customization, but this is only a first step: from customization follows interaction, from interaction follows interactivity, and from interactivity follows, in the right setting, intercreativity” (ibid.: 6).

Among researchers, widespread agreement exists that audience participation is one of the most important developments of the digital environment. However, the research into the dimension of audience participation is limited and the tendency is towards fragmented knowledge: it is usually limited to one country, one media or, even, to one audience activity. Nevertheless, we can mention some studies that draw an optimistic future. The so-called ‘citizen strategy’ emphasises the social contributions viewers can make to improve the quality of programming, to build up social values in the public sphere and to increase pluralism by exchanging different points of view.

As examples of good practice, José Alberto García-Avilés (2012) proposes the programme *Tengo una pregunta para usted*<sup>14</sup>, in which the audience can ask questions to politicians live and direct, or the work of the Audience Ombudspersons, because “they increase the transparency of media processes and also give viewers and users the opportunity to discuss, comment and exchange opinions” (ibid.: 443). A study in the Danish context says that when it comes to news websites, the audience can participate in the production of news in a number of different ways: as sources and making information available for journalists; by collaborating with the professionals on the production of news; by engaging in conversation with the news workers; and by using the journalists as sources for creating more transparency in the news production process (Kammer, 2013).

Therefore, the studies suggest that increasingly complex power relations exist in the relationship between audiences and media workers in the digital environment, but how would it be used in a capitalist context? Philip Napoli (2008: 24) noted that audience activity in a digital environment “illuminate[s] previously concealed dimensions of audiences, many of which are being judged to have significant economic and strategic value, and, perhaps most important, can facilitate the gathering of types of information that previously could not have been gathered”. In other words, Philip Napoli forecasted the creation of the biggest “focus group” that any researcher (sociology, marketing, etc.) could imagine, and social networks have indeed become an important source of information about customers. It is a guarantee of its expansion, but it does not ensure the “citizen strategy” linked with transparency that European countries need to reinforce the idea of Europeanism as a supra-nationhood within their citizenship.

13. In his book, *The Third wave* (1980), edited by Bantam Books (USA), Alvin Toffler introduced this concept.

14. Based on the French programme (TF1) *J'ai une question à vous poser*. It was launched in Spain by public television in 2007.

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